

Audio Description – Where and How?

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By Fred Brack, fbrack@acb.org

This paper, which discusses how people in the USA who are blind or have visual impairment can find **audio description opportunities for live theater, television, movies, DVDs, and streaming videos**, was written by Fred Brack, Webmaster for the Audio Description Project. You are welcome to print and redistribute this document as you see fit, keeping in mind that it is updated periodically. This is version 6, dated August 2019.

Audio description is a narration service for individuals who are blind or have visual impairment. A specially trained individual known as an **audio describer** provides an ongoing dialogue of visual events that are taking place on the **stage, screen, television, or at other events**. Audio description is **commentary and narration** that guides the listener through the presentation with concise, objective descriptions of scenes, settings, costumes, body language, and "sight gags," all slipped in between portions of dialogue or song. In movie theaters and at live performances, for example, a patron using this service wears an earpiece, so they can hear the remote describer explain the visual events taking place, while at the same time hearing onstage or onscreen dialog, thus providing a more robust experience while enjoying the show. For television and videos, the audio description is provided by listening to an alternate sound track.

The **audio describer** is the person who writes a script for a program such as a television series or a movie, or he or she may be the person who "ad libs" the audio description for a live theatre performance (though some "live" audio describers will do extensive preparation and script their descriptions). In the first case, professional organizations are employed to have someone review the film or television show and carefully script the description that will later be read by a professional voice-over artist (audio narrator) and recorded for the studio that has produced the work. For live theater, the description could be provided by a professional but is often provided by an amateur audio describer who has been specially trained to do audio description on a part-time basis. That person previews the show several times to get familiar with it, and then delivers the description between the spoken lines in the show for the user to appreciate the visual aspects of the performance. Often a second describer prepares a script which is read ahead of the show to familiarize the patron with the stage layout, scene changes, costumes, etc.

We will now address **how** you can find out about which **live theatre** shows might be audio described, which **movies** have description and **where** to watch them, which **DVDs or Blu-ray discs** have audio description, which **online streaming services** offer audio description, and how you find out about **television shows** with description and access the description itself.

Please note: there is *never* any charge to the consumer to take advantage of audio description. Organizations usually need to pay professional or amateur describers to create and voice the description, but no one can charge you to listen to the description or to borrow a headset.

THEATRE

Let's start now by discussing **live theatre**. In several dozen mostly larger cities around the United States, private individuals or organizations offer their audio description services to local theatre groups. These theatre groups generally pay the describer or organization to provide a service in which an audio describer previews a live show several times, and then comes on a specific show date to transmit the audio description via a microphone whose signal is received by patrons wearing earpieces. In the Raleigh North Carolina area, for example, that service is provided by an organization named **Arts Access Incorporated**. Like similar organizations around the country, Arts Access trains audio describers and makes the audio description service available to local theatres and also provides the transmitter and earpieces that are necessary for patrons to hear the audio description. Local theaters may or may not choose to offer audio description, and they may or may not choose to advertise which shows will have description available in advance. However, Arts Access, the organization providing the service, makes this information available on their website, ArtsAccessInc.org, to anybody who is interested in finding out what shows feature audio description locally.

So *how do you know* if there is an organization offering audio description service in your area, or if there are any theatres which offer audio description? The best way is to go to a national website called [The Audio Description Project](http://TheAudioDescriptionProject), which is an initiative of the **ACB, the American Council of the Blind**. There you will find many things of interest to people who are looking for audio description; but specifically for this purpose, you may wish to look under the **Performing Arts** tab to find *your* state and see if *your* city has any theatres which offer audio description. You can also look at the **AD Services** tab to find out if there's an organization in your city which is providing audio description services, and you can check with them to see what might be available locally.

TELEVISION

Let's turn now to **television**. In 2002 the Federal Communications Commission ruled that major broadcast television networks and the largest cable television networks must provide a certain number of hours of audio described television shows each quarter in the USA. The FCC's authority to do this was challenged in court by various organizations, and the FCC's mandate was struck down. It took 8 long years for Congress to reinstate the FCC's authority to mandate description, and nearly 2 more years to implement it. Currently, nine broadcast and cable networks are required to provide a minimum of 87.5 hours of audio description for television shows per quarter. Curiously, audio description for television is sometimes called **video description**, but we will use the term audio description.

Many **popular TV series** have audio description. For example: all three NCIS series, all three Chicago series, Modern Family, The Simpsons, some Masterpiece Theatre programs, and children's programs on several networks, including Saturday mornings. Currently over 200 TV series are audio described.

While at the present time the law only requires description to be provided in the top 60 broadcast markets in the United States, from a practical point of view this service is available

much more broadly. This is because the cable networks are required to provide the description based on the number of customers, and they generally meet those requirements, while satellite systems like DirecTV serve the entire United States and are also required to provide description. And since broadcast networks are providing the service for some markets, they might as well pass the description out to all local affiliates, regardless of market size. The bottom line is: most people should be able to receive audio description on at least some of the television shows in their area.

So this leaves two challenges: one, finding out **what shows** have audio description, and two, **how** to receive the description. Let's address the latter point first. Audio description is integrated into a *copy* of the regular sound track of a TV show. The result is an **alternate sound track**. It is passed to the listener as an audio signal on something conceptually called the **Second Audio Program** channel, which is abbreviated **S-A-P** and is sometimes pronounced "sap." It is most often referred to as the **S-A-P Feature**. *Technically*, now that everything is digital, the signal is no longer delivered by the S-A-P channel, but that's what it is still called.

To activate the SAP Feature, you need to go into the menu system of your television set or your cable box and locate the **Audio menu**. Under Audio, you will find an option to turn on SAP. Sometimes the **remote control** will have a button labeled **Audio** or **MTS** or even **SAP**, and by pressing this button you can rotate through the two or three audio options generally provided. But if you must go to a menu and select the audio functions, you may find the option you are looking for listed under **Languages**. There you may find that your two options are most likely English and Spanish (or Español), depending on how the manufacturer wishes to present this. The option Spanish or Español is there because Spanish language is sometimes made available via the SAP channel. So the SAP or Secondary Audio Program audio channel can be either Spanish-language or audio description -- or nothing.

If you have visual impairment, you may need some sighted assistance to figure out how you activate the SAP feature on your TV or network cable box. Again, it may be as simple as pressing one button to switch between regular audio and SAP, or it may be as complicated as a half dozen or more key presses using up and down arrows, etc., to get to the audio menu and select either SAP or Spanish-language to turn on audio description. Universal controllers can often be programmed to do this using one button.

If you turn on the SAP channel for a show which has description, you should hear the regular soundtrack, but overlaid with a describer's voice filling in some of the visual details of what's going on to help you more fully enjoy the show. If you don't hear the describer's voice, it could mean that the show does not have description for this particular episode or your local station or cable provider is not passing through the description. Once you first successfully access audio description, you will be more comfortable in making this evaluation, because you'll know how to access it and will have heard it at least once.

Alas, some strange things can happen. For instance, you may be listening to audio description, and then a commercial comes on. The commercial will just play normally because there is no description supplied. Then all of a sudden you may hear nothing. The reason for this is that the network has allowed the local station to insert their own advertisement at this point, and the

local station may choose not to pass regular audio on the SAP channel when there is no description; therefore, you get no sound at all when the local station has nothing to put on the second audio program channel. For this reason, it is best when a described show ends to reset the audio to the normal mode so that anybody else using the TV will not be wondering why there is no sound coming out at all! (Some cable boxes, such as DirecTV's Genie, automatically reset when the station is changed, or a recorded program ends.) Another problem can occur due to a conflicting need for the use of the SAP channel. The FCC now mandates that emergency message scrolls at the bottom of the screen (like weather warnings) be voiced IF the SAP channel is in use, and this overrides the description track. Accordingly, you may lose the entire soundtrack for a minute or possibly much longer while the message is repeatedly voiced. At this point, after hearing the message, you *may* wish to deactivate the SAP channel temporarily, so you can hear regular audio.

We should also mention that most recent **video recorders** (known as DVRs or TiVo boxes) will automatically record the SAP channel for you, so you can activate it during playback. Earlier models didn't do this, and you had to have SAP activated during the recording process. If yours works that way and is provided by your cable or satellite service provider, ask for a new unit.

Here's something very important: If you are using a satellite or cable box, ***don't make any changes on your television***: the control of the second audio program comes exclusively through the cable box itself. If you happen to be using what's called a Broadcast Digital Converter Box to translate over-the-air digital signals for your old analog television, then you will need to activate a separate feature on *that* box to activate the SAP feature; however not all converter boxes that are available have this capability.

Finally, we should note that in December 2016 the FCC required that all new video equipment must offer **audio menus**. Using your remote, you should be able to activate speech to review information about the current program, read the program guide, or adjust other features. Older cable or satellite equipment has typically been updated to include this feature. If your rented cable box does not support audio menus, the company *must* provide you with a new one without additional charge, even if it would cost sighted subscribers more.

So, in summary, to listen to audio described TV shows, find a show which has audio description and activate the SAP feature, the Second Audio Program, on your television (if it is connected to an antenna) or the cable box, even when playing back a previously recorded show.

Now let's look at **how you find out what shows have description**. There are several methods. First, we list the *names* of all described programs on our website **by Network**. You can also search the online listings of the various television broadcast and cable networks. Sometimes they have separate pages labeled audio description or video description which list only shows with description, and we try to point you to them. Sometimes the regular schedule has little symbols beside certain shows indicating that show features description. But the best way may be to go to a specialized listing service. There may be more of these coming over time, but our own Sebastian Andrade-Miles provides an updated file every week that you can access through the Internet. His listing includes all the stations for which he can find this data. (PBS is a notable exception.) The American Foundation for the Blind, the AFB, also provides an online

service which lists shows available specifically in your area by your local provider, or you can use the National Federation of the Blind's Newsline service.

You will find the addresses for any online services and additional information on how to find out what shows are described and how to activate description on your television at the **Audio Description Project** website under the **TV** tab. The web address for the Audio Description Project website is www.acb.org/adp, so it's the American Council of the Blind's website (acb.org) followed by **/adp**, for **Audio Description Project**. Click on the **About AD on TV** tab there, and you'll find all the information we have talked about, and more.

MOVIES

Now let's turn to **first-run movies**. Most major studios now have audio description tracks professionally recorded for their movies. It used to be that if the cinema installed the necessary equipment to offer audio description, it would only be for *one* of the screens in multiplex theaters. Now, with the advent of digital projection and a DOJ (Department of Justice) ruling, essentially all the projectors have the capability to pass along the audio description for the movie, and you should be able to listen to description on any screen. To access the description, ask for an **audio description headset** when you purchase your ticket at the box office.

This is still an **evolving technology**, so there may be some difficulties here and there getting reliable service. Check with your local theater to see whether they offer audio description. If not, pressure them to do so! Many theater chains, such as Regal, also offer separate online listings showing which movies have audio description tracks. The website captionfish.com also offers a list of local described movies; you can use their filter to select **Descriptive Video** only. You should also note that the conversion to digital projection equipment (which allows the reception of description on all screens) is an ongoing process, and older movie theaters may or may not have invested in this new technology yet. Legally, they had until June 2018 to comply with the DOJ mandate. It's a pretty safe bet that new theaters are installing digital equipment now and the equipment to receive description, thanks to ADA-related lawsuits that have been filed and won across the country. **AMC, Cinemark, and Regal** are leaders in providing this service.

The one caution we would make here is that when you are handed your headset, you need to make sure that they didn't misunderstand you and are giving you an Assisted Listening Device (ALD) headset for people who are hearing-impaired! *You don't want an ALD headset: you want the audio description headset.* Often the same headset (typically with two earpieces) is used for AD and ALD with just a setting change on the receiver, but sometimes physically different headsets are used (typically one earpiece for AD and two earpieces for ALD). In the latter case, once you get the right headset, you should be able to remember for the next time when you're handed one of the headsets whether it feels exactly the same as the one you used before. If not, be sure to get that straightened out *before* you go into the theater. In general, ALD headsets will amplify all sound coming from the projected movie, while the audio description headset will only offer the alternate soundtrack for the main feature. So if previews start and you hear the soundtrack in your headset, it is probably the wrong type of headset.

Now there is one other option for movie audio description that you should consider. It's a free iPhone or Android App called **Actiview**. They offer around 30 free AD tracks for both current and past movies. You can download an AD track, go to the movie theater, and listen using your own smartphone and earphones. If you later find the movie available on a streaming service or TV, you can do the same at home. This presents an interesting option for people who need AD to listen to it while others in the same room listen to the regular sound track. Again, the App is called Actiview.

DVDS

When a studio has paid to have an audio description track made for one of its first-run films, it's a fairly simple process to have that additional soundtrack made available on any **DVD or Blu-ray disc** that is subsequently produced for that movie. If the DVD or Blu-ray disc has audio description available, it should say so on the rear cover in the **Languages** section, where one of the options should read **English Audio Description, Descriptive Video, or DVS**. DVS stands for Descriptive Video Service, a registered trademark of WGBH Media Access Group, a major producer of description for TV and movies. The term DVS has become a bit like Kleenex or Xerox, where one brand's trademark has become common terminology for the same product produced by other vendors; so you may see or hear that term applied generically. By the way, older Warner Brothers' DVDs are an exception to the rule: they indicate description is available in the lower right corner of the rear cover. And at the present time, only Sony video products list whether or not they have description on Amazon.

When playing the video and you are presented with the menu screen following the previews (which are generally not audio described), use the main menu to go to **Set Up** or **Languages**. In the Languages menu, select Audio Description, and then Play. Obviously you may need sighted assistance to accomplish this. The audio description will start immediately following the standard FCC and anti-piracy messages, which usually play silently for up to 30 seconds. Like some of the television remote controls, you may find an audio button on the remote control for your DVD or Blu-ray player. By pressing that button, the system may cycle through the various language choices available, so you may just be able to press that once the video starts. There are also a few movies, typically those produced by Pixar Studios, which offer you the chance to select audio description as soon as the disc begins playing. If that option is available, you will hear a chime right after the disc is inserted. Pressing the number 5 key, possibly followed by Enter, should activate description.

As of the start of 2018, most but not all major movie studios are offering audio description language tracks on many of their videos. The "Good Guy" list currently includes the original three, Sony, Universal, and the Disney companies, plus Fox, Paramount, Warner Brothers, and a limited number from Lionsgate.

So how do you find out **which videos have audio description tracks**? Again the Audio Description Project offers this information, and we are the *only* complete supplier of this information. If you go to the audio description project website, www.acb.org/adp, and click on the **All DVDs** tab, you will find a master list of *all* the videos which have been released with audio description tracks since 1997. Some of the older ones may or may not be described on

rental versions, but essentially all are today. New DVDs and Blu-ray discs with audio description tracks are announced each week on the main page of the Audio Description Project website, and you can subscribe there to updates, or you can get weekly updates from the project's **Facebook** page or **Twitter** feed. Look for “Audio Description Project” on Facebook or Twitter.

By the way, another possible source for described videos is your **State Library for the Blind**. Sometimes they record their own description tracks, but more often these days they will have the commercial versions with description available for loan to qualified subscribers.

STREAMING

Our final topic is **video streaming services**. There is a lot of competition today for mostly fee-based delivery of video on your internet-connected TV or portable media devices like iPads. Some of those services offer audio description for their programming, while others are under pressure to do so. As of the middle of 2019, the following services offer a significant number of audio described movies and other programming: Amazon’s **Prime Video** (with over 650 titles), **Hulu** (just starting up with 40 titles), **Netflix** (with nearly 1000 titles), Apple’s **iTunes** (with over 1000 titles), plus the free **Watch ABC App** for ABC network programming. Even an adult video site offers description for a subset of its videos! Coming this fall: Apple TV+ and Disney+; and in 2020, HBO Max. We hope they will all include audio description. We offer **alphabetized listings of described titles from Hulu, iTunes, Netflix, and Prime Video**, and we have a separate page devoted to general information about Streaming Services. Check our Streaming page for updates.

And please note that perhaps our most important offering is our **Master AD List**, which includes every audio described video currently available at the cinema (as first-run movies), on DVD and Blu-ray disc (since 1997), on the nine mandated TV networks, or on the streaming services (Hulu, iTunes, Netflix, or Prime Video) – a number approaching 3000 video offerings with description.

CONCLUSION

So there you have it. Audio description is available at no extra charge at selected live theatre performances, in most movie theaters, on television, on select purchased or rental DVDs and Blu-ray discs, and on several streaming video services. *You* need to take the initiative to find out what is available locally or online, then take advantage of it!

This paper on audio description was written by Fred Brack, webmaster for the Audio Description Project. If you have any feedback on, or suggestions for improvement to this document, please send them to fbrack@acb.org.